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ABSTRACT

This article describes the use of an eMentoring program by the Orphan Foundation of America, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping young people move out of foster care and into adult life. The eMentoring program, which allows youth and their mentors to communicate via e-mail, helps foster youth prepare for work life by matching them with mentors based on their professional interests. The article includes highlights of the eMentoring process and a discussion of the benefits and risks of mentoring through e-mail. (GCP)

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Mentoring by Modem

by

Julee Newberger

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Mentoring By Modem
by Julee Newberger

David Ahlgren entered foster care at 14, when his mother died and his father was unable to cope with raising eight children. David, his two brothers and five sisters were moved from their home in Guam to five different U.S. states, where they would live apart until their time in foster care ended. Then they would be on their own.

At 18, after living in a Moore, Oklahoma foster home, David "aged out" of foster care, and was literally left on a street corner with his personal belongings. "I had no medical support, no financial support, and I worked three or four jobs during the summer and two during the school year to survive," Ahlgren says.

Ahlgren came up with the money to attend Central Oklahoma University thanks in large part to a scholarship from the Orphan Foundation of America, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping young people move out of foster care and into adult life.

The foundation also hooked him up with an "eMentor" named Tim Robinson, a Virginia computer engineer with whom he corresponds about work, school and everyday issues. For Ahlgren, a junior majoring in business administration, the mentor means as much as the money.

"With foster care we might be able to get help as far as housing and finances," Ahlgren says, "but as far as one person who's there for you, saying I'm here, saying happy birthday ... it's one of those missing pieces in our life."

Robinson first learned about the Orphan Foundation's eMentoring program from a newspaper story about the nearly 20,000 kids aging out of foster care each year, and about how these young people are more likely than other kids to end up unemployed or dependent on public assistance.

The eMentoring program fits in well with Robinson's work and family schedule. Unlike talking on the phone or through instant messaging, he and Ahlgren can check in whenever they want and not risk being interrupted.

"It's been very good for both of us," says Robinson, who is married with an 11-year-old daughter. "It's made me aware of certain issues concerning young adults, particularly

orphans, and helped me to formulate better ideas about parenting."

One thing he's learned is how to demonstrate "firm patience" with his daughter. "David has helped me understand that kids don't need to be coddled, they need strong guidance to help them plan for the future."

In many cases, eMentors end up providing support in different aspects of their students' lives. Kathy Moore, a speech-language pathologist with a 21-year old daughter, has mentored two young women, one with a child of her own. She found herself offering not only professional but child-rearing advice. Moore believes this was easier by e-mail than it might have been in a face-to-face meeting.

"Kids these days are so tuned into e-mail," Moore says. "It's less threatening to open up in e-mail than to talk in person." Moore also appreciates the convenience of being able to log on whenever she has time. "You can do it at 11 o'clock at night," Moore says.

From Foster Care to Professional Life

According to Jean Rhodes, mentoring expert and author of *Stand by Me: The Risks and Rewards of Mentoring Today's Youth*, mentors can play a very important role in the lives of foster youth as they make the transition to adulthood. "This is a period of vulnerability for all kids," Rhodes says, "but the issues are highlighted for foster children."

Orphan Foundation of America executive director Eileen McCaffrey has also seen first-hand the importance of a caring adult in the lives of foster youth, many of who grow up moving through foster homes, group homes and residential treatment centers.

"They don't see people sitting around dining room table paying bills, planning for vacation next year, they're not learning by example," McCaffrey says. "They don't really know what it takes to be an adult."

But the supply of traditional mentors may not be enough to serve the needs of children leaving foster care as young adults, particularly males. "It could be said that most mentors recruited nationally would prefer to be matched with younger children, and that the number of women volunteering to be mentors is far greater than the number of males," says Mary Furnas, an independent consultant who works with agencies that promote the use of technology with foster youth.

"The number of youth in foster care waiting for a mentor grows long," Furnas says. "The number of older youth in foster care waiting for a mentor grows even longer."

A March 2002 report from the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago concurs that foster youth have acute needs when it comes to moving out of care and into professional life. The study shows that youth aging out of foster care in California, Illinois and South Carolina were under-employed, earned significantly less than low-income youth who were not coming from the foster care system, and had

average earnings below the poverty level.

The eMentoring program helps foster youth prepare for work life by matching them with mentors based on their professional interests. For example, Ahlgren's interest in computers led him to Robinson, who encouraged him to start his own Web design company, Guamboy Technologies, last year. The company has a few loyal clients who "keep the expenses covered," Ahlgren says. So far, he has built over 15 web sites and hopes to expand in the near future.

Bill Sisson, a computer sales consultant, wanted to mentor a young person, but frequent business travel prevented him from committing to regular one-on-one meetings. For the last six months, he has been an eMentor to Joe Kelley, a junior at Western Washington University.

Kelley's major is accounting, and he envisions himself in a business career, although like many college students, he's not exactly sure what kind. Sisson suggested that in lieu of Kelley's job washing cars, he apply for work at Costco. Kelley pursued it and got the job.

"It's an opportunity to work in a professional environment," Sisson says, "and demonstrate some skills that will push him along in corporate environment."

Log in and Make a Connection The eMentoring program serves about 160 students. Funded in large part by Casey Family Programs, the program costs about $1,200 per student. The Orphan Foundation's goal is to serve 400 students by the end of 2003, and 2,500 students by 2004. The Northrop Grumman Foundation will provide funds to help them achieve these goals.

Currently, 1,700 mentors are waiting in the wings. "There's no lack of adults wanting to make a difference," McCaffrey says.

E-mentors go through a screening process that includes an FBI background check. Their eight-hour training includes "netiquette," the proper role of a mentor, and the special characteristics of the foster care population, many of whom have been abandoned by adults throughout their lives.

"A lot of people have physically come into our lives and disappeared," Ahlgren says. That's one reason that eMentoring could be a good alternative for foster youth. Because the program is more convenient for mentors, they may be more likely to stick around, rather than come and go from young people's lives. Even if they move geographically, they can still be involved.

Rather than trade personal e-mail addresses, students and eMentors correspond through a secure Web site. The site includes software that raises a red flag when certain words—like "depression" or "suicide"—appear in an e-mail. Caseworkers are alerted to those messages, and can intervene if necessary. Pairs don't exchange phone numbers or private e-mail addresses. Meeting face-to-face is prohibited—until the student graduates from

college. According to McCaffrey, many e-mentors choose to attend graduation ceremonies.

Starting soon, a new online component will enable students to have their own "filing cabinets" in which to place personal information. They'll have calendars for class schedules, so that mentors can monitor them and see whether they've taken on too much, or whether they have room for extracurricular activity. The Web site will also feature a library of useful information and tips for mentors and students.

"One of our goals is to make mentors feel like they're part of a team," McCaffrey says. "We're doing everything to safeguard and protect the relationship without stifling its development."

Online or in Person?

Mentoring expert Jean Rhodes believes in the all-important role of a consistent and caring adult in a young person's life, but she's not sure e-mail is the most effective way to go. "There are so many nuances to a relationship that cannot be conveyed online," Rhodes says. "I can see eMentoring having an important ancillary role," Rhodes says, "but whether or not it can replace a person to person relationship is unknown."

Research shows that kids in well-structured, traditional mentoring programs demonstrate better grades and test scores, increased school attendance, higher college enrollment rates and improved self-esteem and behavior overall. They also have a decreased likelihood of dropping out of school, using drugs or alcohol, or becoming a teen parent.

But little research on eMentoring specifically has been done to date. "We need to know more," Rhodes says, "because it's spreading."

The Orphan Foundation of America does its own research by conducting entrance and exit interviews with mentors and asking them to fill out monthly questionnaires. The foundation is getting ready to work with Old Dominion University in Virginia and the University of Southern Alabama on a formal evaluation.

According to executive director McCaffrey, people are increasingly reluctant to sign up for traditional one-on-one mentoring programs due to time constraints and issues of liability. What if a young person makes false accusations that they have acted inappropriately? What if they have to move or leave the child's life? E-mail makes it easier. "You have to meet mentors and volunteers in a place that's comfortable for them," McCaffrey says.

"Our program allows people to develop a deep relationship over a period of time," McCaffrey says. "The goal is really to have someone who can take an active interest in the student's education and be a resource."

Resources:

- The Orphan Foundation of America
- National Mentoring Partnership
- http://psych.umb.edu/faculty/rhodes
  Mentoring expert and author Jean Rhodes' Web site

Talk Back
If you've got comments or questions about this story, we'd like to hear them. Send your response to Julee Newberger.

Julee Newberger is managing editor for Connect for Kids .

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